

FRANK SWINNERTON

Appreciations



*With Biographical Particulars
and Notes on His Books*

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By

ARNOLD BENNETT

and

H. G. WELLS

With Biographical

Particulars

and

Notes on His Books



NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

BY FRANK SWINNERTON

YOUNG FELIX

THE THREE LOVERS

COQUETTE

SEPTEMBER

SHOPS AND HOUSES

NOCTURNE

THE CHASTE WIFE

ON THE STAIRCASE

THE HAPPY FAMILY

THE CASEMENT

THE YOUNG IDEA

THE MERRY HEART

GEORGE GISSING: *A Critical Study*

R. L. STEVENSON: *A Critical Study*

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A Personal Sketch

By ARNOLD BENNETT

THERE was nothing in the slightest degree romantic or marvellous in my first meeting with Frank Swinnerton. It all happened in the most ordinary way. One day, perhaps eight or nine years ago,* I received a novel entitled *The Casement*. I was then living in a very mediæval *pavilion* in an old quarter of Paris. I remember quite well that an American friend came for Christmas Eve dinner in this fastness or fortress. I had a new and wondrous coffee-machine of which I was proud, and in which I made the coffee with my own hands. On that night I put the ground coffee in the wrong end of the machine, with the result that finally the precious liquid inundated the whole of the sideboard instead of reaching the cups; also the mediæval oil-lamps were left with the wicks too high in the drawing-room, so that when we returned to the drawing-room after mopping up the coffee, every object therein was evenly covered with a coat of greasy black soot, and the opaque atmosphere scorched the eyes and parched the throat.

To return to *The Casement*. The book was accom-

* Mr. Bennett's sketch was written in 1917.

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panied by a short, rather curt note from the author, Frank Swinnerton, politely indicating that if I cared to read it he would be glad, and implying that if I didn't care to read it, he should endeavor still to survive. I would quote the letter, but I cannot find it—no doubt for the reason that all my correspondence is carefully filed on the most modern filing system. I did not read *The Casement* for a long time. Why should I consecrate three irrecoverable hours or so to the work of a man as to whom I had no credentials? Why should I thus introduce foreign matter into the delicate cogwheels of my programme of reading? However, after a delay of weeks, heaven in its deep wisdom inspired me with a caprice to pick up the volume.

I had read, without fatigue but on the other hand without passionate eagerness, about a hundred pages before the thought suddenly occurred to me: "I do not remember having yet come across one single ready-made phrase in this story." Such was my first definable thought concerning Frank Swinnerton. I hate ready-made phrases, which in my view—and in that of Schopenhauer—are the sure mark of a mediocre writer. I began to be interested. I soon said to myself: "This fellow has a distinguished style." I then perceived that the character-drawing was both subtle and original, the atmosphere delicious, and the movement of the tale very original, too. The novel stirred me—not by its powerfulness, for it did not set out to be powerful—but by its individuality and distinction. I thereupon wrote to Frank Swinnerton. I forget entirely

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what I said. But I know that I decided that I must meet him.

When I came to London, considerably later, I took measures to meet him, at the Author's Club. He proved to be young; I daresay twenty-four or twenty-five—medium height, medium looks, medium clothes, somewhat reddish hair, and lively eyes. If I had seen him in a motorbus I should never have said: "A remarkable chap,"—no more than if I had seen myself in a motorbus. My impressions of the interview were rather like my impressions of the book; at first somewhat negative, and only very slowly becoming positive. He was reserved, as became a young author; I was reserved, as became an older author; we were both reserved, as became Englishmen. Our views on the only important thing in the world—that is to say, fiction—agreed, not completely, but in the main; it would never have done for us to agree completely. I was as much pleased by what he didn't say as by what he said; quite as much by the indications of the stock inside the shop as by the display in the window. The interview came to a calm close. My knowledge of him acquired from it amounted to this, that he held decided and righteous views upon literature, that his heart was not on his sleeve, and that he worked in a publisher's office during the day and wrote for himself in the evenings.

Then I saw no more of Swinnerton for a relatively long period. I read other books of his. I read *The Young Idea*, and *The Happy Family*, and, I think, his critical work on George Gissing. *The Happy Fam-*

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ily marked a new stage in his development. It has some really piquant scenes, and it revealed that minute knowledge of middle-class life in the nearer suburbs of London, and that disturbing insight into the hearts and brains of quite unfashionable girls, which are two of his principal gifts. I read a sketch of his of a commonplace crowd walking around a bandstand which brought me to a real decision as to his qualities. The thing was like life, and it was bathed in poetry.

Our acquaintance proceeded slowly, and I must be allowed to assert that the initiative which pushed it forward was mine. It made a jump when he spent a week-end in the Thames Estuary on my yacht. If any reader has a curiosity to know what my yacht is not like, he should read the striking yacht chapter in *Nocturne*. I am convinced that Swinnerton evolved the yacht in *Nocturne* from my yacht; but he ennobled, magnified, decorated, enriched and bejewelled it till honestly I could not recognize my wretched vessel. The yacht in *Nocturne* is the yacht I want, ought to have, and never shall have. I envy him the yacht in *Nocturne*, and my envy takes a malicious pleasure in pointing out a mistake in the glowing scene. He anchors his yacht in the middle of the Thames—as if the tyrannic authorities of the Port of London would ever allow a yacht, or any other craft, to anchor in mid-stream!

After the brief cruise our friendship grew rapidly. I now know Swinnerton—probably as well as any man knows him; I have penetrated into the interior of the

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shop. He has done several things since I first knew him—rounded the corner of thirty, grown a beard, under the orders of a doctor, and physically matured. Indeed he looks decidedly stronger than in fact he is—he was never able to pass the medical examination for the army. He is still in the business of publishing, being one of the principal personages in the ancient and well-tryed firm of Chatto and Windus, the English publishers of Swinburne and Mark Twain. He reads manuscripts, including his own—and including mine. He refuses manuscripts, though he did accept one of mine. He tells authors what they ought to do and ought not to do. He is marvellously and terribly particular and fussy about the format of the books issued by his firm. Questions as to fonts of type, width of margins, disposition of title-pages, tint and texture of bindings really do interest him. And misprints—especially when he has read the proofs himself—give him neuralgia and even worse afflictions. Indeed he is the ideal publisher for an author.

Nevertheless; publishing is only a side-line of his. He still writes for himself in the evenings and at week-ends—the office never sees him on Saturdays. Among the chief literary events of nineteen seventeen was *Nocturne*, which he wrote in the evenings and at week-ends. It is a short book, but the time in which he wrote it was even shorter. He had scarcely begun it when it was finished. In regard to the result I am prepared to say to the judicious reader unacquainted with Swinnerton's work, "Read *Nocturne*,"—and to

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stand or fall, and to let him stand or fall, by the result. *Nocturne* moved H. G. Wells to an extraordinary enthusiasm, so much so that Wells had to write to the morning papers about it. And I remember Wells saying to me: "You know, Arnold, he achieves a perfection in *Nocturne* that you and I never get within streets of." A hard saying to pass between two hardened pilgrims whose combined years total over a century; but justified. You can say what you like about *Nocturne*, but you cannot say that on its own scale it is not perfect, consummate. At least, I cannot.

Besides being no mean publisher and a novelist who has produced several fine and one perfect novel, Frank Swinnerton has other gifts. He is a surpassingly good raconteur. By which I do not signify that the man who meets Swinnerton for the first, second or third time will infallibly ache with laughter at his remarks. Swinnerton only blossoms in the right atmosphere; he must know exactly where he is; he must be perfectly sure of his environment, before the flower uncloses. And he merely relates what he has seen, what he has taken part in. The narrations would be naught if he were not the narrator. His effects are helped by the fact that he is an excellent mimic and by his utter realistic mercilessness. But like all first-class realists he is also a romantic, and in his mercilessness there is a mysterious touch of fundamental benevolence—as befits the attitude of one who does not worry because human nature is not something different from what it actually is. Lastly, in this connection, he has su-

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perlatively the laugh known as the "infectious laugh." When he laughs everybody laughs, everybody has to laugh. There are men who tell side-splitting tales with the face of an undertaker—for example, Irvin Cobb. There are men who tell side-splitting tales and openly and candidly rollick in them from the first word; and of these latter is Frank Swinnerton. But Frank Swinnerton can be more cruel than Irvin Cobb. Indeed, sometimes, when he is telling a story, his face becomes exactly like the face of Mephistopheles in excellent humour with the world's sinfulness and idiocy.

Swinnerton's other gift is the critical. It has been said that an author cannot be at once a first-class critic and a first-class creative artist. To which absurdity I reply: What about William Dean Howells? And what about Henry James, to name no other names? Anyhow, if Swinnerton excels in fiction he also excels in literary criticism. The fact that the literary editor of *The Manchester Guardian* wrote and asked him to write literary criticism for *The Manchester Guardian* will perhaps convey nothing to the American citizen. But to the Englishman of literary taste and experience it has enormous import. *The Manchester Guardian* publishes the most fastidious and judicious literary criticism in Britain.

I recall that once when Swinnerton was in my house I had there also a young military officer with a mad passion for letters and a terrific ambition to be an author. The officer gave me a manuscript to read. I handed it over to Swinnerton to read, and then called

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upon Swinnerton to criticize it in the presence of both of us. "Your friend is very kind," said the officer to me afterwards, "but it was a frightful ordeal."

The book on George Gissing I have already mentioned. But it was Swinnerton's work on R. L. Stevenson that made the trouble in London. It is a destructive work. It is very bland and impartial, and not bereft of laudatory passages, but since its appearance Stevenson's reputation has never been the same. Those who wish to preserve their illusions about the greatness of Stevenson should refrain from reading it. Few recent books of criticism have aroused more hostility than Swinnerton's *Stevenson*. There is a powerful Stevenson cult in England, as there is in America. And in London there are sundry persons who cannot get far into any conversation without using the phrase, "As dear old R. L. S. used to say." Some of these persons are personages. They rage at the mention of Swinnerton. One of them on a celebrated occasion exclaimed in fury: "Never let me hear that man's name!" This detail alone shows that Swinnerton is a real critic. Sham criticism, however violent,—and Swinnerton is incapable of violence—does not and cannot arouse such passion.

CONCERNING MR. SWINNERTON

By H. G. WELLS

"But do I see afore me, him as I ever sported
with in his time of happy infancy? And may I
—*may* I?"

This May I, meant might he shake hands?

—DICKENS, *Great Expectations*.

I DO not know why I should be so overpoweringly reminded of the immortal, if at times impossible, Uncle Pumblechook, when I sit down to write a short preface to Mr. Swinnerton's *Nocturne*. Jests come at times out of the backwoods of a writer's mind. It is part of the literary quality that behind the writer there is a sub-writer, making a commentary. This is a comment against which I may reasonably expostulate, but which, nevertheless, I am indisposed to ignore.

The task of introducing a dissimilar writer to a new public has its own peculiar difficulties for the elder hand. I suppose logically a writer should have good words only for his own imitators. For surely he has chosen what he considers to be the best ways. What justification has he for praising attitudes he never adopted and commending methods of treatment from which he has abstained? The reader naturally receives his commendations with suspicion. Is this man, he asks, stricken with penitence in the flower of his middle-age? Has he but just discovered how good are the

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results that the other game, the game he has never played, can give? Or has he been disconcerted by the criticism of the Young? The fear of the Young is the beginning of his wisdom. Is he taking this alien-spirited work by the hand simply to say defensively and vainly, "I assure you, indeed, I am *not* an old fogy; I quite understand it." (There it is, I fancy, that the Pumblechook quotation creeps in.) To all of which suspicions, enquiries and objections, I will quote, tritely but conclusively, "In my Father's house are many mansions," or in the words of Mr. Kipling:

There are five and forty ways
Of composing tribal lays,
And every blessed one of them is right.

Indeed, now that I come to think it over, I have never in all my life read a writer of closely kindred method to my own that I have greatly admired; the confessed imitators give me all the discomfort without the relieving admission of caricature; the parallel instances I have always wanted to rewrite; while on the other hand for many totally dissimilar workers I have had quite involuntary admirations. It is not merely that I do not so clearly see how they are doing it, though that may certainly be a help; it is far more a matter of taste. As a writer I belong to one school and as a reader to another—as a man may like to make optical instruments and collect old china. Swift, Sterne, Jane Austen, Thackeray, and the Dickens of *Bleak House* were the idols of my youthful imitation, but the

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contemporaries of my early praises were Joseph Conrad, W. H. Hudson, and Stephen Crane, all utterly remote from that English tradition.

This much may sound egotistical, and the impatient reader may ask when I am coming to Mr. Swinnerton, to which the only possible answer is that I am coming to Mr. Swinnerton as fast as I can and that all this leads as straightly as possible to a definition of Mr. Swinnerton's position. The science of criticism is still crude in its classification, there are a multitude of different things being done that are all lumped together heavily as novels, they are novels as distinguished from romances, so long as they are dealing with something understood to be real. All that they have in common beyond that is that they agree in exhibiting a sort of story continuum. But some of us are trying to use that story continuum to present ideas in action, others to produce powerful excitements of this sort or that, while again others concentrate upon the giving of life as it is, seen only more intensely. Personally I have no use at all for life as it is except as raw material. It bores me to look at things unless there is also the idea of doing something with them. I should find a holiday, doing nothing amid beautiful scenery, not a holiday, but a torture. The contemplative ecstasy of the saints would be hell to me. In the—I forget exactly how many—books I have written, it is always about life being altered I write, or about people developing schemes for altering life. And I have never once "presented" life. My apparently most objective

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books are criticisms and incitements to change. Such a writer as Mr. Swinnerton, on the contrary, sees life and renders it with a steadiness and detachment and patience quite foreign to my disposition. He has no underlying motive. He sees and tells. His aim is the attainment of that beauty which comes with exquisite presentation. Seen through his art, life is seen as one sees things through a crystal lens, more intensely, more completely, and with less turbidity. There the business begins and ends for him. He does not want you or anyone to do anything.

Mr. Swinnerton is not alone among recent writers in this clear detached objectivity. But Mr. Swinnerton, like Mr. James Joyce, does not repudiate the depths for the sake of the surface. His people are not splashes of appearance, but living minds. Jenny and Emmy in this book are realities inside and out; they are imaginative creatures so complete that one can think with ease of Jenny ten years hence or of Emmy as a baby. The fickle Alf is one of the most perfect Cockneys—a type so easy to caricature and so hard to get true—in fiction. If there exists a better writing of vulgar lovemaking, so base, so honest, so touchingly mean and so touchingly full of the craving for happiness than this, I do not know of it. Only a novelist who has had his troubles can understand fully what a dance among china cups, what a skating over thin ice, what a tight-rope performance is achieved in this astounding chapter. A false note, one fatal line, would have ruined it all. On the one hand lay brutality; a hundred imitative

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louts could have written a similar chapter brutally, with the soul left out, we have loads of such "strong stuff" and it is nothing; on the other side was the still more dreadful fall into sentimentality, the tear of conscious tenderness, the redeeming glimpse of "better things" in Alf or Emmy that could at one stroke have converted their reality into a genteel masquerade. The perfection of Alf and Emmy is that at no point does a "nature's gentleman" or a "nature's lady" show through and demand our refined sympathy. It is only by comparison with this supreme conversation that the affair of Keith and Jenny seems to fall short of perfection. But that also is at last perfected, I think, by Jenny's final, "Keith . . . Oh, Keith! . . ."

Above these four figures again looms the majestic invention of "Pa." Every reader can appreciate the truth and humor of Pa, but I doubt if anyone without technical experience can realize how the atmosphere is made and completed and rounded off by Pa's beer, Pa's meals, and Pa's accident, how he binds the bundle and makes the whole thing one, and what an enviable triumph his achievement is.

But the book is before the reader and I will not enlarge upon its merits further. Mr. Swinnerton has written four or five other novels before this one, but none of them compares with it in quality. His earlier books were strongly influenced by the work of George Gissing; they have something of the same fatigued grayness of texture and little of the same artistic completeness and intense vision of *Nocturne*. He has also

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made two admirable and very shrewd and thorough studies of the work and lives of Robert Louis Stevenson and George Gissing. Like these two, he has had great experience of illness. He is a young man of so slender a health, so frequently ill, that even for the most sedentary purposes of this war, his country would not take him. It was in connection with his Gissing volume, for which I possessed some material he needed, that I first made his acquaintance. He has had something of Gissing's restricted and gray experiences, but he has nothing of Gissing's almost perverse gloom and despondency. Indeed he is as gay a companion as he is fragile. He is a twinkling addition to any Christmas party, and the twinkle is here in the style. And having sported with him "in his times of happy infancy" I had an intimate and personal satisfaction to my pleasant task of saluting this fine work that ends a brilliant apprenticeship and ranks Mr. Swinnerton as Master.

This is a book that will not die. It is perfect, authentic, and alive. Whether a large and immediate popularity will fall to it, I cannot say, but certainly the discriminating will find it and keep it and keep it alive. If Mr. Swinnerton were never to write another word I think he might count on this much of his work living, when many of the more portentous reputations of to-day may have served their purpose in the world and become no more than fading names.

December, 1917.

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Some Biographical Particulars

By GRANT OVERTON

AS THESE lines are written Frank Swinnerton is preparing for his first visit to America. His best novel to date is on the presses. Towns are asking anxiously for his lecture appointments. People like Thomas Beer and Lloyd Morris and Dr. Joseph Collins are preparing critical studies of his work. America, which has all along surpassed England in the appreciation of this English novelist, will give him a wide welcome.

The enthusiasm for Swinnerton, friendliest of men and most informative of speakers, will multiply the readers of *Young Felix*. As for that most recent novel, it will double his audiences. Let arithmetic take its course.

What is he like? Arnold Bennett gives an excellent idea, but in the six years since he put his impressions on paper Frank Swinnerton has overcome what at first appeared to be an invincible shyness. "He will now," says Mr. A. St. John Adcock in his *Gods of Modern Grub Street*, "rise on a platform or at a public dinner and make you an admirably serious or witty and humorous address with the completest self-possession." His somewhat reddish, pointed beard, the twinkle in his

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eyes, have caused it to be said that Swinnerton is French in appearance—with the instant addition that no one could be more English. But I question the “English.” Swinnerton is exceptionally easy to get acquainted with, which is not exactly a traditional English trait. His sense of humor is one capable of, and practising, frivolity; and the standard Englishman avoids being frivolous from feelings of impropriety, or perhaps insecurity, and for reasons of dignity. A man who went to London on a visit while Swinnerton was ill in a hospital told me that the greatest delight of his stay, lasting for several weeks, was the afternoons when he sat at Swinnerton’s bedside and listened to the lucid exposition of all the ins and outs of literary London. Literary London is labyrinthine. It is full of minotaurs that await the uninstructed visitor. Swinnerton’s conversation, amused, good-tempered and richly anecdotal, was an Ariadne-thread.

What is his history? Mr. Wells hints it in speaking of Swinnerton’s critical study of George Gissing. Swinnerton says, of *Young Felix*: “Some passages in the early chapters are autobiographical, as also is the last scene of all.” He adds that to stress this would be to give a wrong impression of the book. But it is pertinent in considering the man. There is other autobiographical material in his fiction. Born in 1884 at Wood Green, a suburb of London without any of the rural attributes its name suggests, he was up against the worst cruelties of the city from the first. There was a great deal of sordidness and squalor in the life about the little boy,

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but there was also a great deal of heroism and devotion, as readers of *Young Felix* will understand. At eight years a severe illness disabled him for school, and thereafter delicate health and recurring breakdowns were frequent. His schooling was negligible. All the same he read continually and quantitatively. When, at fourteen, he became a clerk in a London office he was really rather better educated than most youths of his age. After a few years Swinnerton was working for the publishing house of J. M. Dent & Company, whence he went to the firm of Chatto & Windus. He has been with Chatto & Windus ever since as a literary adviser, dividing his time between this work and his reviewing and novel-writing. It must be said that until very recent years his life has continued to be much beset by almost every imaginable difficulty. The matchless *Nocturne*, for example, was written in a period of the greatest domestic stress, illness, anxiety and loneliness. So great was the author's preoccupation that he had, as he says, no feeling but shame for the work he was so hurriedly producing. *Nocturne* was written in six weeks, less a fortnight in which the story could not be made to progress beyond a scene on board the yacht.

When Swinnerton went into an office at fourteen it was in circumstances similar to those in which Stephen Moore (*The Chaste Wife*) began. "The previous years," he says bluntly, "had been years of serious illness and starvation." Again he says: "The character of Amberley, in *On the Staircase*, is a sort of semi self-

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portrait, but gilded for purposes of fictional interest. *The Happy Family* enshrines some memories of very early days and gives some of my publishing experience. *On the Staircase* holds this much of personal reminiscence that the flat in which the Grettons live at the top of the house in Great James Street is the flat in which my family lived for a couple of years." But these are incidents, and they do not contradict Swinnerton's avowed belief that anything like literal autobiography is not fiction, and that fiction is not well served by adopting suggestions from real persons for its characters.

Mr. Swinnerton began with three novels that were never published, and continued with three novels that were published but not read. His very first of all, which gave him a joy of creation that he was not to experience again until the composition of *Young Felix*, was finished when he was eighteen and while he was working in the Dent office. This book as well as his next two the young author fed to the fire. Then, having gone to Chatto & Windus, he completed *The Merry Heart*, receiving word of its acceptance on his twenty-fourth birthday. It was followed by *The Young Idea*, and that by *The Casement*. Then came American publication, with *The Happy Family*. In spite of the fact that, at the time, Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, May Sinclair, Granville Barker and various others were putting forth exhaustive studies of the various strata of English middle-class family life, this tale had the power of simultaneously arousing and

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satisfying curiosity as none of the other books did. It dealt with the life of the London suburbs and it depicted ruthlessly the discontents of this unromantic and irritating class of people, whose sordidness, vulgarity, and aping snobbishness are forever battling with idealism and a high adventurousness in their young people.

But the book that first won attention and appreciation for Swinnerton in literary England was his *George Gissing*. All the various literary groups began to rush him; he has, however, remained apart from any of these. It was this book that led to Swinnerton and H. G. Wells making acquaintance, as Mr. Wells relates. When *On the Staircase* was brought out, Frank Swinnerton was very well known indeed. But his progress, book by book, is epitomized to some extent in the bibliography following this article. I must stick to the man. During the Great War he was laid low by an illness so long and serious that it nearly put an end to him. He recovered and put all the ardor of convalescence into *The Chaste Wife*. Of the distressing circumstances in which *Nocturne* was written, something has been said. It will be gathered that the man has a power of concentration quite past the ordinary, and that is true. He wrote *September*, for another instance, in four months. It must be remembered that all his fiction is executed while carrying on other things. And—he does nothing badly. His London Letter, written each month for a number of years, is the finest letter of the sort that goes out of England.

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The portrait of Swinnerton is incomplete without two bits from personal letters. The first is from a reply to a note in which I asked about the circumstances in which he worked on *The Three Lovers*:

“My impression is that *The Three Lovers* was planned and begun in 1919. Then I began it again at the end of last year, and wrote a fair amount in the winter. But when I was half through the book, the telephone bell went. It kept on going. Letters kept on arriving. My mother fell ill, and a fine series of troubles began. All the time over, daily work had to be kept going. *The Three Lovers* languished. Something had to be done. I pulled myself together and began again. Then in came the decorators to paint my flat through and through. For days, I snuffled paint and for nights slept in it. Then Nature stepped in. Also one of my friends. ‘You must go away.’ So I went to a little fishing village in Devonshire, and through many crowds of children and cats and dogs, in broiling weather. I worked all the morning, went walking in the afternoon, and worked again between tea and dinner. The room was a tiny one, and the table caught my knees. The scene outside was a fierce temptation. I hated it. But as every book I have ever written (except the first), has been the result of a fight with abnormal laziness, this one eventually got finished. I had demanded an old-fashioned plum pudding for dinner, on whichever day the words, ‘The End’ were written. The day came. The words were written. It was the very hottest day of the year. My

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landlady walked 'round and 'round the kitchen wringing her hands and saying, 'I *can't* give him plum pudding on a day like this. It's much too hot. I *can't*.' But in the end she did. And I ate it. As the book was finished, it did not seem to matter whether I lived or died. It was a good plum pudding.

"The book is intended to show how different a man or woman is in his (her) own eyes from the creature imagined by others. Therefore, each person in the book is supposed to be seen obliquely from the viewpoint of several others. The problem of the best sort of a man for the modern girl is indicated (not argued), and beyond all, I have tried to tell a story."

Very recently, in answer to a similar inquiry about the genesis of *Young Felix*, Mr. Swinnerton wrote a letter of a very moving quality. I give it here in full:

"*Young Felix* was begun when I was staying down near the Lizard in Cornwall and writing *Coquette*. The strain of keeping day after day to a book so comparatively circumscribed as *Coquette* in its action and the number of characters involved made me feel as if I should burst. And so one day I said to myself: 'I will now write a huge great chronicle novel with lots of jokes and digressions.' And so I began *Young Felix* in the middle of *Coquette* and as a sort of antidote to that book in my literary system. Of course it has not turned out as I meant it to do, but some passages in the early chapters are autobiographical, as also is the last scene of all. I don't want to stress the autobiographical note, as this is bound to be enlarged

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on by reviewers and will give a wrong impression of the book. The aim I had was to write a chronicle novel, about serious and tragic things, and squalid as well (as the mixture often is in life), but lightened by the rather buoyant personality of the central character and by the variety of persons straying in and out of the book. I wanted the book to have the air of life, but also of happy life intermingled with the disasters, or seeming disasters, that mould character. I can't tell if I have succeeded, but that was the idea. While I finished *Coquette* and wrote *The Three Lovers*, Felix was stewing in my mind, and he popped out again last winter, when I again went down to Beer, in Devonshire (where Thomas Beer's ancestors, he says, rot all around) and wrote up to about one-half way through. I then came back to London, took possession of my own new old cottage in Surrey, and there, in a big studio in the garden (big enough for*) I finished the book. It is the first book since the first of all that I have rather enjoyed writing. I felt freer and happier while doing it than I have felt for years. The weather was almost always fine, the situation both at Beer and at my cottage was congenial; and I used to go out to the studio in the morning and come in for food when I felt inclined. In the afternoons I roved the countryside and in the evenings (the long spring and early summer evenings) I pottered about the garden.

"That is all I can tell you. There are about a

* A word that looks like "dancing."

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thousand chapters that haven't been written of that book; and they never will be written. These must do for Felix Hunter. I have got lots more people to write about, and lots of books to write about them, because I am just beginning all over again, and am going to try and do some better work in future."

Notes On His Books

THE MERRY HEART. Published in England only, in 1909. "If neither in story nor in characterization this buoyant, quietly humorous romance of a London clerk will compare with his maturer fiction, it has a charm and morning freshness of feeling and outlook to atone for what it may lack in finish," says A. St. John Adcock in his *Gods of Modern Grub Street*.

THE YOUNG IDEA. Published in England in 1910; a small importation was published in New York by Duffield & Company. The book led Arnold Bennett to remark: "This young man knows his business so well that he doesn't need anyone to show him his faults." Mr. Adcock says: "It marks a great advance in his mastery of the type of novel to which he was particularly devoting himself. This 'comedy of environment' traces with a wonderfully sympathetic understanding the mental and moral development of Hilda Vernon, who is a clerk in a London office. She shares a flat with her boorish brother and delightful younger sister, and disillusioned and disheartened by her everyday experiences of the mean-

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ness and squalor of the life around her, longing still to believe 'in the beauty of something, in the purity of some idea, or the integrity of some individual,' but giving up hope, she meets with a man, a clerk like herself, who by his clean, courageous personality and strength of character saves her from despair and revives her old faith in humankind. The novel is remarkable for its insight and subtle analysis of character no less than for the interest of its story."

THE CASEMENT. Published in England only, in 1911. This novel resulted in the discovery of Swinnerton by an American, Floyd Dell, now himself well established as a novelist, who said that Swinnerton knew all there was to know about the young girl, and would certainly do "bigger work."

THE HAPPY FAMILY. Swinnerton's first novel to receive American publication, in 1912. The canvas is as inclusive as the suburbs of London. Arnold Bennett: "*The Happy Family* marked a new stage in his development. It has some really piquant scenes, and it revealed that minute knowledge of middle-class life in the nearer suburbs of London, and that disturbing insight into the hearts and brains of quite unfashionable girls, which are two of his principal gifts. I read a sketch of his of a commonplace crowd walking round a bandstand which brought me to a real decision as to his qualities. The thing was like life, and it was bathed in poetry."

GEORGE GISSING: A CRITICAL STUDY. Published in

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England in 1912, in America in 1923. H. G. Wells in his preface to *Nocturne*: "It was in connection with this Gissing volume, for which I possessed some material he needed, that I first made Swinnerton's acquaintance. His earlier books were strongly influenced by the work of Gissing; they have something of the same fatigued greyness of texture." Those unfamiliar with the facts of Gissing's life will be interested by this account of one of the most unfortunate of the heirs of literature.

ON THE STAIRCASE. Published in 1914. A study in family personality that created a mild furore in London. Arnold Bennett: "I must tell you that I think this is a very distinguished novel indeed, and if there is a better one during the year, I should be interested to see it!" The book chronicles affairs in the history of two families, but what most readers find most delightful is the incidental romance of Susan, that motherly young person who expected to be an old maid, but with amazement found herself the centre of an idyll.

R. L. STEVENSON: A CRITICAL STUDY. Published in England in 1914, in America in 1923. "It was Swinnerton's work on R. L. Stevenson," says Arnold Bennett, "that made the trouble in London. It is a destructive work. It is very bland and impartial, and not bereft of laudatory passages, but since its appearance Stevenson's reputation has never been the same. Those who wish to preserve their illusions

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about the greatness of Stevenson should refrain from reading it. Few recent books have aroused more hostility than Swinnerton's *R. L. Stevenson*. There is a powerful Stevenson cult in England, as there is in America. And in London there are sundry persons who cannot get far into any conversation without using the phrase, 'As dear old R. L. S. used to say.' Some of these persons are personages. They rage at the mention of Swinnerton. One of them on a celebrated occasion exclaimed in fury: 'Never let me hear that man's name!' This detail alone shows that Swinnerton is a real critic. Sham criticism, however violent—and Swinnerton is incapable of violence—does not and cannot arouse such passion."

THE CHASTE WIFE. Published in England in 1916, in America in 1917. A novel of marital felicity, the story of love's triumph over a man's mistaken idea of "kindness" to his wife. It is hard not to believe that Stephen Moore is a self-confession, so emotionally and unsparingly is this difficult, morose and tormented character drawn, but we must take the author's word for it that he is not. The literary and critical opinions expressed by Stephen so impressed the editor of *The Manchester Guardian* that he immediately wrote to Swinnerton asking him to do critical articles for the *Guardian*. "The fact that the literary editor of *The Manchester Guardian* wrote and asked Swinnerton to write literary criti-

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cism for the *Guardian* will perhaps convey nothing to the American citizen. But to the Englishman of literary taste and experience it has enormous import. *The Manchester Guardian* publishes the most fastidious and judicious literary criticism in Britain." Thus Arnold Bennett.

NOCTURNE. Published in 1917. Republished, 1923, by George H. Doran Company in the Murray Hill Library. See the Introduction to *Nocturne* by H. G. Wells, in the preceding pages. Also "Frank Swinnerton: A Personal Sketch," by Arnold Bennett, in the pages preceding. The events described in *Nocturne* occur in the space of a single night from 6 p.m. to very early on the following morning. Two girls, their father and their "young men" are the only actors.

SHOPS AND HOUSES. Published in 1918. With the indignation of youth against the instinct of oppression as its theme, this is a story of life in an English suburban town near enough to London to be the home of City men. The book gives an exquisitely humorous picture of small town snobbishness. A black sheep of one of the "first families" has the effrontery to return and set up as a grocer in Beck-with itself! The complications are finally set straight through love. Swinnerton is very happy in his portrayal of Louis Vechantor, of Dorothy and of Veronica—and especially of the town gossip, Miss Lampe.

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SEPTEMBER. Published in 1919. A close study of feminine psychology. The four principal characters are a man of about 50, a woman of 38, a man of 25 and a girl who is 21 years old. According to custom the Howard Forsters have come down to their quiet country place at the beginning of summer. Marian Forster, in her late thirties still wonderfully young, turns her mind wearily to the future; Howard, over 50, overfed, pathetically foolish in the pursuit of the pleasures of youth, has ceased to count with Marian; within herself she feels alone, without any special interest in what is to come. Then two things happen: she meets Nigel Sinclair, and Cherry Mant's mother sends Cherry to visit Marian. With 25-year-old Nigel, Marian experiences a swift, delightful understanding. She is fascinated with trying to understand Cherry, beautiful, undeveloped, strangely sophisticated, subtly perverse, immediately hostile to Marian, envious of her mature calm. Cherry's relations with Howard Forster, Marian's brief poignant happiness in Nigel's love, and, back in town in September, her loss of him to Cherry's triumphant youth, make up the tale. Finely penetrating is Swinnerton's study of the friendship and conflict between the older and younger woman. Over and above the story broods the mood of September, the autumnal quality in Marian's life.

COQUETTE. Published in 1921. The story of an intense, emotional girl, Sally Minto, caught early in

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the snares of love. At eighteen there are within her grasp her life's ambitions, power and wealth. Love, only, blocks the way. Sally undertakes to bend her fortune and her passion to suit her will. The result is a story of compressed power and human emotion that has taken rank below *Nocturne* only. In technique, *Coquette* has much of the unification which was so outstanding an excellence in the case of *Nocturne*, with the difference that here the unity is in the heroine and not in the interval of the action. But the *accelerando* of *Coquette* is noteworthy. Such a character as Gaga would be an achievement in the work of any author.

THE THREE LOVERS. Published in 1922. A novel of modern London life. A young and intelligent girl, alone in the world, is introduced abruptly to a kind of life with which she is unfamiliar. Drawn into a modern and free-going group of artists, writers and actors, she is dazzled by the splendor of what seems real romance and freedom. But the surface gilt wears off and she faces the truth, which is hard to bear. The novel shows the development of her character and her struggle for the love of the men toward whom she is most attracted. The analysis of Patricia Quin is done with that simplicity, quiet deftness and inoffensive frankness which are hall-marks of Mr. Swinnerton's fiction. The book is representative of all sides of his talent.

YOUNG FELIX. Published in 1923. A story of great

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poignancy and beauty, a story too of upsurging gaiety in the face of the slow march of disastrous circumstance. Mr. Swinnerton unfolds the intimate family affairs of the Hunters, mother and father, Godfrey and Felix, Grumps and Auntie Lallums. As one lives through the successive turns of their fates, it becomes apparent that this is London middle-class life as the author has seen it at first hand. Felix and his mother stand out from all the others, the former for his cleverness, cheerfulness and extreme sensitivity to every breath of life, the latter for her madonna-like radiance, her tenderness and courage. The most moving book that Mr. Swinnerton has written, the longest, most ambitious and most successful. Written with a casualness that masks great skill, the book is saturated in that tender, unsentimental, ironic and yet sympathetic mood which made the greatness of *Nocturne*.

